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SUBJ: Water and Waste: A Challenge to Israeli Policy

Ref: (A) Tel Aviv 242 (B) Tel Aviv 613

1. (SBU) SUMMARY. The Israeli-West Bank water crisis continues to deepen, with new data confirming the need for difficult choices. Knesset hearings have questioned government management of Israel's water sector. Media debate continues on which users - consumers or agro-industry - will be cut back. The situation is aggravated by reports claiming that illegal waste dumping is polluting the shared Israeli and PA aquifers. Comment: the strong linkage between water and waste problems may merit addressing them in tandem in the Annapolis Process multilateral working groups. End Summary.

Water Worries Increase

2. (SBU) The Israeli government and media are starting to focus on the critical relationship between water and waste. Living within the confines of the Jordan River and the Mediterranean, between Lebanon's mountains and the Gulf of Aqaba, are 12 million people in a water-stressed environment. As noted refs A and B, several years of substandard rainfall and over-pumping of groundwater resources have led to critically short freshwater supplies and an increasing risk of salinization of the natural water sources shared by Israelis and Palestinians. In early March the director of the Palestinian Water Authority, Fadel Qawash, discussing the water situation in the Gaza Strip, said the results of over-pumping are already evident. Three-quarters of the water being pumped in Gaza from the Gaza aquifer now has a saline level higher than that permitted for drinking water.

3. (U) On March 18 the Knesset Interior and Environment Committee held discussions on the water crisis. Members of Knesset (MKs) leveled criticism at the government for delaying funding for two new desalination plants that were approved in 2000 but still not begun by 2006. Israel Water Authority (IWA) Director Uri Shani responded that the rains that year were sufficient and the Ministry of Finance therefore decided it could save the 2 billion NIS cost to the budget. Israel's total supply of freshwater is 984 million cubic meters (mcm) per year, of which 832 is natural water and 152 mcm is desalinated water. Shani noted further that Lake Kinneret, Israel's chief freshwater reservoir, was expected to fall below the red-line level of minus 213.00 meters (below sea level) by July, at which point it is undesirable to withdraw water as it risks salinization of the groundwater resources, growth of duckweed, and would have other negative ecological impacts. Shani predicts that the Lake will fall to the black-line level of minus 214.40 meters by December 2008. At this level, it will no longer be possible to pump water since the pumps themselves will be above the water line.

4. (SBU) Shani noted the annual amount of usable water in Israel has decreased over the past 16 years by 164 mcm, from 1.34 billion cubic

meters to 1.175 billion cubic meters. (Note: the usable water calculation counts fresh and treated wastewater distribution.) Global warming is partly to blame, but so is greater pollution, which has rendered some water unusable for recycling options. Although plans target increasing the desalinated water supply to 550 mcm by 2012, the IWA representative said there is little that they can do immediately to increase supply. Controlling demand is the only option. Defenders of the agricultural sector told the Knesset that their sector has already made great strides in efficiency, and that it is now time for consumers to learn to conserve.

An Alternative View

15. (SBU) Other analysts of the water situation take a more critical view of the efforts of the agricultural sector. German hydrogeologist Clemens Messerschmid declared in Haaretz (Left of center daily, circ.75,000) on March 7 that there is plenty of water; the problem is mal-distribution. Berlin receives less rain than Jerusalem, he observes, 550 milimeters vs 554 milimeters, and geologically Israel and the West Bank are ideally suited for water storage in aquifers. (Comment: Clemens' logic is specious, in that Berlin need not rely on local rainfall as a major freshwater source as does Israel; major rivers provide water in Germany. Nor is evaporation a major issue in Germany. End Comment.) Clemens notes that agriculture uses a greater percentage of water than consumers do, yet has shrunk to provide only 2 percent of Israel's GDP. It is illogical for Israel to produce water-intensive crops like bananas, melons, and cut flowers for export to the well-watered European market. Clemens also believes that Israel uses regional water supplies disproportionately, exacerbating the scarcity of water in the PA areas. The IWA acknowledges that agriculture uses 450 mcm of freshwater per year - on top of all the treated wastewater. Most analysts agree, nonetheless, that Israeli consumers have shown little restraint. Shani said per capita water consumption in 2007

TEL AVIV 00000678 002 OF 002

grew from 106 to 108 cubic meters, and that water use in Israel is growing by 4 percent annually.

The Waste Factor

16. (SBU) Israeli media have recently highlighted the country's growing problems with waste disposal, and the impact waste is having on water supplies. As noted Ref B, debris from construction, demolition and excavation (so called C,D & E waste) now outpaces standard municipal trash by weight, the result of a major building boom during the past five years of strong economic growth. Haaretz reports that much of this C,D & E waste is being trucked to unregistered landfills in the West Bank, and the GOI is turning a blind eye to the practice. In fact, legal disposal options are few and expensive: no regulated, approved C, D & E landfill exists in Israel's northern region, and only one exists in Eastern Galilee. The Ministry of Environmental Protection approved on March 4 the establishment of a new landfill at Gush Halav to service the northern region and avoid the costly transport to southern Israel.

17. (SBU) Whether dumped in Israel or the West Bank, the net impact on water is the same. C,D & E waste may be filled with asbestos debris, toxic paints, heavy metals, and inorganic pollutants that leach into the soil and seep into ground water. Given the shared aquifers, the environmental impact of waste disposal practices on either side of the Green Line will ultimately affect the other party. A Haaretz editorial declared that the waste problem "should serve as a test case for the joint treatment by Israel and the Palestinians of environmental problems, including the pollution of groundwater by unpurified wastewater and insufficient infrastructure of disposal sites for household waste." As ref A reported, Israel is already starting to treat Hebron-generated effluent which flows out of the West Bank. A two-year study (funded partly by the Embassy's MERC program) of the Basor River flowing from Hebron to the Gaza Strip found it full of both municipal waste and industrial toxins from Palestinian stone and leather industries. Israel has built a treatment plant to handle the waste, but the report estimates over 45 percent of the pollutants seep into ground water before the river reaches the plant.

Comment

18. (SBU) The USG is already closely engaged with Israel and the PA on water management issues through the Trilateral Water Working Group established in 1996, after Oslo. In the context of the Annapolis Process working groups addressing water and infrastructure (among other) issues, consideration should be given to establishing a parallel working group to address regional waste disposal issues. Alternatively, the mandate of the TWWG could be broadened to include the inter-related waste and water issues.

JONES